

October 31, 2001

Docket Management System
U.S. Department of Transportation
Room Plaza 401
400 Seventh St. SW.
Washington, DC 20590-0001

RE: Docket No. FAA-2001-10191/ Petition for exemption

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), representing the interests of over 375,000 aviation enthusiasts and professionals nationwide, respectfully submits the following comments to the cited petition for exemption. If granted, this action will provide relief to Title 14 CFR Part 91.209(a)(1) and (b), allowing the United States Air Force to conduct night-vision goggle “lights-out” training in the Alaskan military operating areas (MOAs) and selected MOAs within the lower 48 contiguous United States and Puerto Rico. Although AOPA recognizes the military’s need to train in an environment that closely replicates actual combat conditions, steps must be taken by both the Air Force and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to ensure that the resulting impact to the general aviation community is mitigated and an equivalent level of safety is achieved.

The granting of this petition would significantly impact how the pilots of non-participating aircraft exercise their “see-and-avoid” responsibilities mandated by Title 14 CFR Part 91.113 (b), which states in part:

“...When weather conditions permit, regardless of whether an operation is conducted under instrument flight rules or visual flight rules, vigilance shall be maintained by each person operating an aircraft so as to see and avoid other aircraft...”

This regulation makes no distinction between civil and military pilots, and is mandated for all airspace users. Supporting the see-and-avoid principal is the regulation from which the Air Force seeks exemption. Title 14 CFR Part 91.209 requires the use of aircraft position and anti-collision lighting systems between sunset and sunrise. By doing so, aircraft can be more easily seen, resulting in an increased level of safety.

The absence of this operational safeguard would establish a dangerous precedent by requiring the pilots of non-participating aircraft to abdicate their responsibility in the see-and-avoid dynamic. Non-participating pilots would be forced to rely completely on the actions of another aircraft pilot, one with whom they will have no contact (visual or otherwise). Although USAF pilots are among the best-trained aviators in the world, there is an inherent danger in having dissimilar aircraft operating under the prescribed conditions without certain safeguards being in place. In short, GA pilots must be given the tools necessary to fly safely in such an environment.

To this end, AOPA would like the following addressed:

1. The comment period of 10 days given in the Federal Register is woefully inadequate to respond to an issue of this complexity. It is also contrary to the guidance given in Title 14 CFR Part 11.89, which states that the FAA usually allows 20 days to comment on a petition for exemption. If it is the FAA's desire to receive substantive input from the public, a more realistic comment period should be provided.
2. Official guidance given to pilots by the FAA must acknowledge that Air Force is responsible for collision avoidance during lights-out operations.
3. The petition submitted by the Air Force contains an appendix outlining the specific MOAs that are to be used for the conduct of lights out training. However, it fails to specify the safety criterion that was used for their selection. Since there are issues of radar coverage, communications, and volume of non-participatory traffic to be considered, the criteria for lights-out operations within MOAs should be included in FAA Order 7400.2, *Procedures for Handling Airspace Matters*. This would allow for ongoing input from both industry and the FAA, and would provide an important vehicle for the continued evaluation of such airspace developments.
4. The Air Force does not address the future expansion of this program. As part of this process, AOPA requests assurance that lights-out operations will not be expanded to include additional MOAs. This would also include assurances that such operations will not be conducted within temporary MOAs.
5. A key issue of both safety, and with it access, is the ability to determine the status of special use airspace. This has been a long-standing concern that predates the lights-out issue. The Air Force states in their petition that notification will be accomplished by NOTAM. Although the military NOTAM system has provisions for such entries, those disseminated to civil pilots do not include this information. Without a change in the NOTAM system, this method of distribution does not work. AOPA asks that military NOTAMs, at least those applicable to special use airspace, be made available to civil pilots through commercially available online resources (i.e. DUATS) and the Flight Service system. This is important for preflight planning.
6. Fixing the NOTAM system still offers no solution to the issue of real-time notification. Presumably, the controlling agency would be the primary source for such information. However, pilots operating VFR are given this type of traffic information only when

permitted by the workload of the controller. Also, depending on the aircraft's location and altitude, communication with the controlling agency may not always be possible. In addressing this point, the petition offers, "...a message will be placed on the unit's local Automatic Terminal Information Service (ATIS)..." There are two problems with this method. First, not all units have such systems in place. Next, given the geographical size of some complexes, pilots may not be able to pick up an ATIS broadcast without the establishment of remote communications outlets. This is a critical safety issue, and AOPA strongly urges that a plan be developed and implemented that will address this concern

It is also vital that a system is established by which the controlling agency sends immediate broadcast updates to all Flight Service Stations proximate to the airspace being used.

7. Regardless of the communicative methodology that is used, the information disseminated to pilots should include the time(s) of operation, and the altitudes and geographical boundaries to be used during the exercise. This would allow pilots another level of safety when operating in such airspace.
8. Non-radar and lost communication procedures are mentioned as provisions to be included in the required Letters Of Agreement (LOA) between the using and controlling agencies. Examples of such procedures should be included in the Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM), allowing pilots to better understand the air traffic environment in which they may operate.
9. The Air Force petition states that efforts will be made to educate the users on all aspects of lights-out operations. This must be modified to include a requirement for an ongoing initiative, and not simply a one-time program. The FAA should also develop an Advisory Circular to advise pilots of the unique operational nature of "light-out" MOAs. Similar guidance should also be provided in the AIM.
10. Another strategy intended to improve safety involves the use of aircraft equipped with onboard sensors, which will clear the training airspace prior to the commencement of activities. It is known that the radar systems of some tactical aircraft use the relative movement of their targets to "paint" an image. Many GA aircraft, by their very nature, fly slowly and in those instances when a change in aspect is minimal, radar may have difficulty in sensing the traffic.

In addition, the use of ground radars was cited as providing an additional level of protection, yet radar coverage within every MOA is not complete. This further emphasizes the need for the additional safeguards outlined in these comments.

11. The specifications for charting the MOAs to be used in lights-out operations have yet to be established. This must be addressed prior to the commencement of such activities. Additionally, contact information for the scheduling/using agency should be in the

tabular portion of the aeronautical sectional charts and within the Airports/Facility Directory for a specific region.

12. The FAA and the USAF needs to publish a plan of action to include an implementation timetable for integrating information from the Military Airspace Management System (MAMS) with that of the FAA's Special Use Airspace Management System (SAMS).
13. Positive action should be taken to ensure **all** controlling agencies accurately report the status of their airspace complexes.

AOPA is deeply concerned with the precedent that would be established through the granting of this petition for exemption. However, if it is decided this proposal needs go forward for reasons of national security, safeguards must be established to mitigate the impact to those with whom the military shares the national airspace system.

Respectfully,

Andrew V. Cebula
Senior Vice President, Government and Technical Affairs
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

Cc: Howard Swancy, AFS-3
Colonel Sheryl Atkins, AF/XOO-CA